THE MYSTERY OF THE GHOST BELL

VAL ABBOTT

Illustrated by RUTH CHEW

$3.95

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No one had heard the bell in the tower of old, abandoned Christ Church ring in over fifty years, although everyone in town knew the legend that it rang to signal the death of one of the townspeople. So when Kathy, Hallie, and Juanita did hear the bell ring, one autumn evening, they were frightened, especially as the sound was so soft and mysterious.

Then the news came that old Grandmother Santiago of the Puerto Rican migrant settlement had died, and Hallie was sure that unnatural forces were at work. When orphaned Luis, who collected old papers and bottles in the town every day to sell to the junk dealer, disappeared without a trace, Juanita cried because

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The Mystery of the ghost bell

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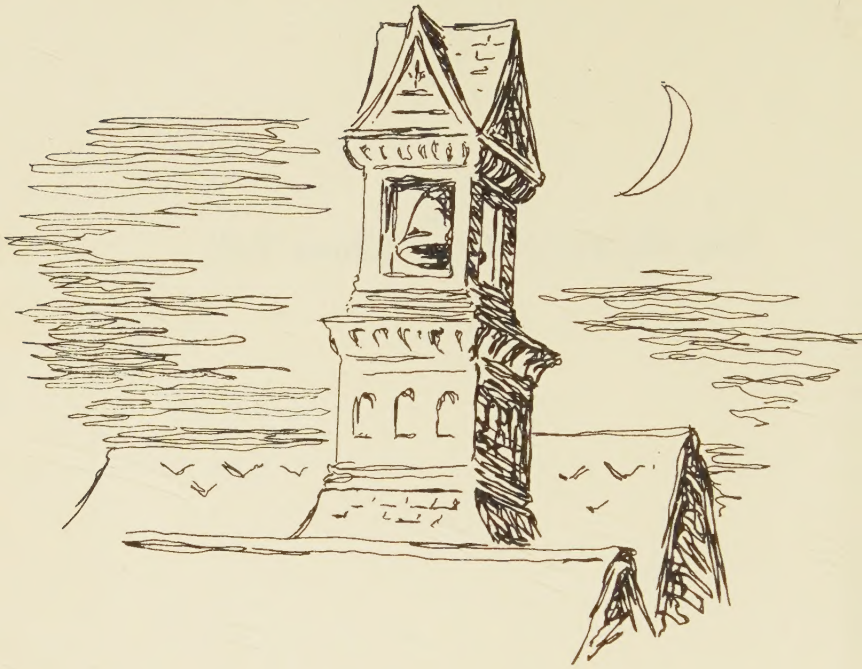
The Mystery of the Ghost Bell



Illustrated by Ruth Chew

The Mystery of the Ghost Bell

VAL ABBOTT

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To Esther

The Mystery of the Ghost Bell

I

Against the red sky, Kathy Gunn could see the old bell inside the church tower, still and silent, a bell which, according to her mother, had not sounded for almost fifty years, not since Christ Church had been closed down.

Old lilac bushes brushed up against walls which had once been white but were now gray, peeled, cracked with age. A rickety old wrought-iron fence, rusted with weather, surrounded the little churchyard. Great oaks and maples grew at the rear of the yard. One maple, its leaves scarlet, had sprouted right up against a wall of the church, nearly covering half the building with its branches.

Kathy shivered a little and said, "It's spooky."

Little Juanita Perez, crouching beside her outside the fence, said, "*Si.*"

Chubby Hallie Barnes, Kathy's oldest and clos-

est friend, who was standing next to Juanita, asked thoughtlessly, "See what?"

Unable to help herself, Kathy laughed, her blue, Irish eyes twinkling.

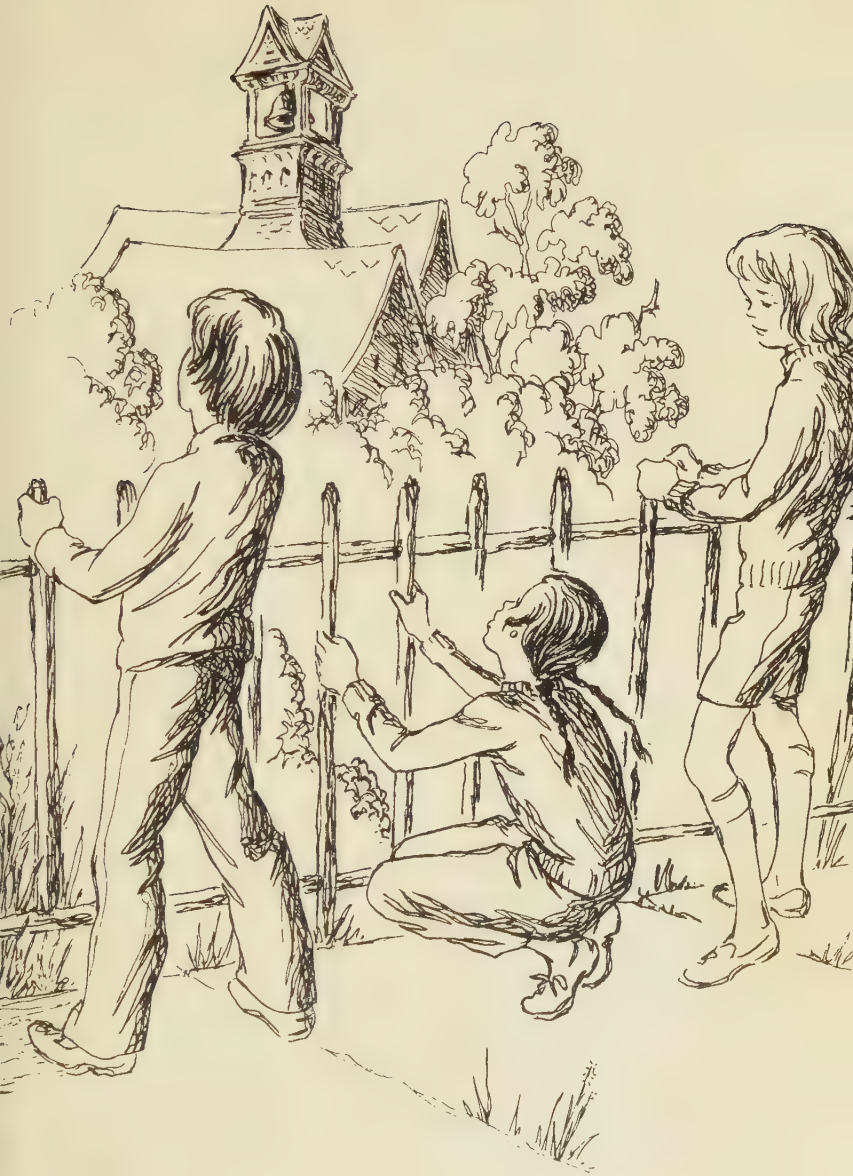
"You know," she said patiently, "*si* means yes in Spanish, Hallie."

Hallie said, "Oh, I forgot."

Hallie was short and stubby, brunette with a pudgy nose dotted with freckles. She would not have admitted it but she envied Kathy her tawny golden hair.

Juanita, her straight black hair in braids down over her shoulders, had dark brown eyes. She was small, trim, pretty. Even though Juanita came from Spanish Town where the migrant Puerto Rican laborers lived, she attended the Ryeville public school with Kathy and Hallie, and they had all three become good friends.

A crescent moon was brightening in the sky now, above the trees in the old churchyard. Beyond, up the grade, Kathy could see the lights beginning to twinkle in Spanish Town, the name given to the block of old shacks and run-down buildings. Behind the girls the lights were going on, too, in the neat, white houses along the main



street of Ryeville.

Kathy could see her own house less than two blocks from Christ Church. Just beyond was the red tower of Town Hall where her father, the town tax assessor, had his office.

Hallie, who had been leaning against the rusted old fence, now stepped back, stretched her chubby arms, and said, "I'd like to hear it ring—just once."

"Don't be silly," Kathy told her. "How could it ring? There's been no one in the building for years and years."

"What was that?" Juanita asked suddenly.

"What was what?" Hallie gasped.

"I—I thought I saw something move over there by the big tree," Juanita told her.

"I don't see anything," Kathy frowned, peering into the shadows.

"Maybe," Juanita said hesitantly, "I do not see it." She swallowed and she said, "I think I go home, Kathy."

Kathy stared at the big tree growing close up against the building. "Maybe you saw a cat, Juanita," she said. "It couldn't be anything."

"You don't know what it could be," Hallie said, shivering. "I just know this old building is

haunted." She paused and then she said again, "If it rang I think I'd—"

Even as Hallie uttered the words the three girls heard the clang of the bell. It rang just once, a soft, dull, hollow sound which did not carry very far, and then was still.

Kathy swallowed before she could speak and then she said in a muffled voice, "What—what was that?"

Just a few moments before they'd been talking about the old bell in Christ Church bell tower, how it was supposed to ring all by itself whenever someone in town died—even though no one had heard it ring in fifty years.

Hallie's round face had gone pale and she said now in a shaking voice, "What was that, Kathy?"

Juanita said in a hollow voice, "The bell, she ring."

Kathy took a deep breath. She wanted to run but her legs were suddenly weak. She kept staring up at the old bell tower, at the old bell, silent now and still against the fading red sky.

"It didn't ring," she said at last. "It—it *couldn't* ring. The church has been closed for nearly fifty years."

Hallie swallowed and said, "That's right, Kathy. Of course it couldn't ring."

Juanita said quietly, "The bell, she ring."

Kathy said, "But that's silly, Juanita. It couldn't have rung. It—it didn't sound like a regular bell, anyway. Not like the bell in our own church across town."

Their church bell had a merry, clanging sound, but what she'd heard this evening had been a single, soft bong.

"Even if it did ring," Hallie said uneasily, "it

must have been the breeze."

Juanita said, "There eeze no breeze."

"Well—" Hallie began, "whatever it was—"

Then they heard it again, the same soft, dull bong, this time unmistakable, coming from the bell up in the old tower.

"It—it did ring!" Kathy gasped. "Hallie! It *rang!* It *rang!*"

"I know it," Hallie half-sobbed, and she was already running down the road toward the main street, running as fast as her chubby legs could

take her, Kathy following.

Juanita came on behind them, long black braids flying.

"Juanita," Kathy called back, "you'd better go on home. *Hurry!*"

Juanita waved to them and then took the dirt path which led up toward Spanish Town."

"Kathy," Hallie panted when they reached the tree-lined main street in Ryeville. "Kathy, you heard it?"

Kathy had slowed down, but she was still breathing heavily.

"I heard something," she said.

"It was the bell," Hallie whispered. "Kathy, you have to admit it. It was the—*the ghost bell.* Somebody died, Kathy. That's what they say about the ghost bell, don't they?"

"That's what they used to say many years ago," Kathy told her. "But, Hallie, the church has been closed for all these years and the bell hasn't rung in all that time."

"Oh, dear," Hallie muttered. "I wish we hadn't gone out there. What—what are we going to do, Kathy? Nobody's going to believe us if we tell them the bell rang."

Kathy nodded slowly.

"You don't think we were imagining it?" Hallie asked her hopefully.

They had stopped outside the gate in front of Hallie's house.

"Juanita heard it, too," Kathy reminded her, "and I don't think she was imagining anything."

"What are you going to tell your father and mother?" Hallie wanted to know.

Kathy thought about that for a moment. "I don't know," she confessed. "There's something I'll have to find out."

"What's that?" Hallie asked curiously.

"I have to find out if—if someone died tonight," Kathy said in a low voice.

Hallie looked at her and Kathy could hear the chubby girl breathing hard.

"Oh, Kathy," Hallie whispered. "Why did it have to be us?"

2

They were having supper a little late that evening, and Kathy's mother was rolling some pork chops in flour when Kathy came into the kitchen.

"Did you do your homework, Kathy?" Mrs. Gunn asked.

"I finished it," Kathy told her and then she sat down on one of the kitchen chairs. "Mother," she said quietly, "did anyone die in Ryeville today?"

Mrs. Gunn stared at her for a moment. Then she ran water over her hands to clean off the flour. "What a strange question," she said. "Why do ask, Kathy?"

Kathy took a deep breath. Then she said, "You remember telling me a long time ago about the old Christ Church bell? I mean the story about it?"

Her mother nodded.

"You said it was supposed to ring," Kathy went

on, "when someone died in town."

"Yes," Mrs. Gunn nodded. "That is the old legend."

"We heard it ring," Kathy said slowly.

Her mother looked surprised and then she said, "Are you *sure* you heard it ring, Kathy?"

"Hallie and Juanita and I," Kathy told her. "We all heard it ring a little while ago, Mother."

Mrs. Gunn sat down at the kitchen table across from her. "Now, Kathy," she said, "we live only about two hundred yards from old Christ Church. I'm sure I would have heard it, myself, if it had rung."

"It wasn't a very loud ring," Kathy admitted. "It was just a kind of—of hollow bong."

"Are you sure you weren't imagining it?" her mother asked. "Little girls often imagine things, you know."

"We heard it twice," Kathy told her.

Mrs. Gunn looked at her again and then she said, "We'll have to tell your father about this."

At the supper table Mr. Gunn listened gravely as Kathy told him about the bell, and when she'd finished he smiled, and said, "Of course I know the legend. I had a great uncle who claimed that it did happen. I've never heard the bell, myself, though."

"Kathy says she heard it," Mrs. Gunn told him.

Mr. Gunn laughed. "I'm sure, Kathy," he said, "that you imagined you heard a bell, and if it did ring it had nothing to do with the old legend about a ghost bell or a death bell."

Mrs. Gunn said curiously, "What do you mean by that, Jim?"

"Well," Mr. Gunn told her, "on the way home from work tonight I had a few words with Mr. Bates, the undertaker. He didn't mention anyone's having passed away, and he would know."

"But, perhaps, he didn't tell you," Kathy persisted.

Mr. Gunn smiled. "I can find out in a minute," he said. "I'll call Mr. Bates."

"Would you, Dad?" Kathy asked. "Please?"

It took but a few moments to put the call through and when Mr. Gunn hung up he said, "No one died in town today, Kathy. Are you satisfied now?"

"I guess so," Kathy told him.

Mrs. Gunn said, "You're not going to worry about it now, Kathy, are you?"

"No," Kathy said, "but Hallie and Juanita were with me, and they heard the bell, too. It was kind of soft."

"So soft," her father smiled, "that you could hardly hear it. Is that right?"

"Yes," Kathy admitted.

"Then, perhaps," her father insisted, "you didn't really hear it, but you thought you did."

"I—I suppose so," Kathy murmured.

She went up to her room later, and she sat by the window, looking out. She couldn't see the old bell tower in Christ Church from this side of the house, but the old church was there, mysterious and silent in the moonlight. The bell in the tower had rung and it had not been her imagination. She just knew that it hadn't been.

It was raining in the morning, a light, but chill, fall rain. After breakfast Kathy put on her raincoat and rain hat and walked down to the corner where she waited with Hallie for the school bus.

Hallie was wearing a yellow slicker, also, and

her round face was worried underneath her wet rain hat. "What did your parents say," she asked, "when you told them about the bell, Kathy?"

"They said I was probably imagining things," Kathy said. "My father even called Mr. Bates, the undertaker, and no one died in town, so it couldn't have been true about the legend, anyway."

"But—but I'm sure we heard the bell," Hallie murmured, "and we heard it twice."

When the bus rolled up to their corner they got on and took the seats in the rear where they usually sat. Kathy sat by the window, staring at the rain-sprinkled glass, listening to the excited talking of the younger children on the bus.

At the next stop Richie Harris got on. Richie was in Kathy's English class and she'd known him since kindergarten. He was fairly tall, dark-haired, with quiet brown eyes.

Dropping into the seat across the aisle, Richie nodded and said, "Hi, Kathy. It sure is raining, isn't it?"

Kathy nodded. She wondered if she ought to tell Richie about the mysterious bell. Like herself, Richie was eleven years old. He wasn't noisy or loud like some other boys she knew. She'd never

seen him get over-excited about anything. If Richie had been with them and had heard the bell she would have been very sure that it had rung.

The more Kathy thought about this the more

anxious she was to tell Richie, but not here on the bus, of course. She decided to tell him later, during lunch.

The bus was now moving up the hill to the stop where Juanita Perez got on with the other Puerto Rican children from Spanish Town.

Juanita, herding four little boys, got onto the bus, saw that the children had seats, and then came down to where Kathy and Hallie were sitting. She dropped into the empty seat ahead of them and turned her head.

Juanita didn't have a raincoat and she'd been holding a piece of old burlap over her head while she waited for the bus. Her shoulders were splattered with rain and there were some raindrops on her brown face, which was very serious.

"You remember last night?" Hallie blurted out.

"*Si,*" Juanita nodded.

"Did we hear the bell ring or not?" Hallie asked her.

Juanita looked at Kathy. She said slowly, "The bell, she ring."

Kathy took a deep breath. "Remember," she said, "I was telling you that the old Christ Church bell was supposed to ring only when someone died in town?"

"*Si,*" Juanita nodded again.

"Well," Kathy went on, "no one died, Juanita."

Juanita's brown eyes gazed past them. Her face was very serious, almost afraid.

"Someone die," she said in a whisper.

Kathy's jaw drooped. "*What?*" she asked.

"Someone die," Juanita repeated, looking at her now.

"For goodness' sake!" Hallie gasped. "Who?"

"Grandmother Santiago," Juanita told her.

"Grandmother Santiago?" Kathy repeated. "You mean the old grandmother over in Spanish Town?"

"*Si,*" Juanita nodded. "She is very old. She die after the sun go down."

Hallie let out a faint cry and the freckles were very brown in her pale face. Richie Harris turned his head to look over at her curiously.

"What time did she die?" Kathy asked in a half-whisper.

"After the sun go down," Juanita repeated.

"That—that was when we heard the bell," Hallie stuttered.

Kathy didn't say anything.

Juanita repeated in a low voice, "Grandmother Santiago, she die."

She said something in Spanish, then, and she made the Sign of the Cross.

Kathy looked over at Richie Harris. He'd noticed, of course, that they were very concerned

about something.

As they were leaving the bus minutes later, Kathy said to Richie, "I have to talk to you about something, Richie. It's very important. Can you come over to our table during lunch?"

Richie nodded. "Sure," he said.

It was still raining when they got out in front of the school and they had to run for the school entrance. Kathy and Hallie went on to their home room together, leaving Juanita in the hall as she was going in the opposite direction.

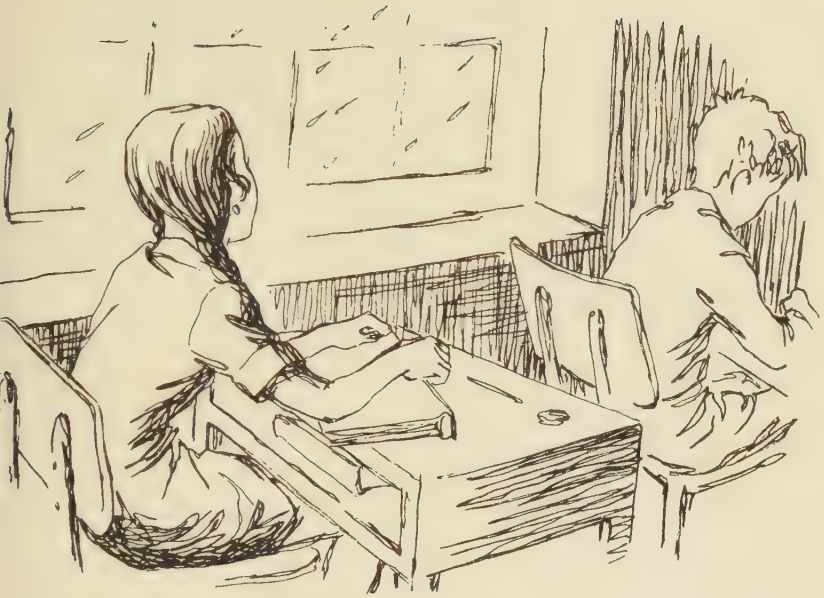
On the way down the corridor toward their home room, Hallie said in a low voice, "Grandmother Santiago. We—we never thought about anybody in Spanish Town dying, did we, Kathy?"

"No," Kathy admitted.

"What are we going to do?" Hallie asked in a low voice. "Nobody believes us, but it happened, Kathy. Didn't it?"

Kathy nodded.

After the home room period, Kathy and Hallie separated, but Kathy was in English Composition with Juanita the second period during the morning. When she glanced over at Juanita on the far side of the room she noticed that the little Puerto



Rican girl was staring at the rain-streaked window as if in deep thought.

When Juanita was called upon to recite, her teacher had to say her name twice before she responded.

It was very difficult for Kathy, too, to think about her lessons. She kept hearing the dull, hollow clang of the Christ Church bell, and every time it clanged she shivered.

3

DURING NOON HOUR Kathy took her lunchbox to a corner table in the lunchroom and waited for Richie to come. Hallie and Juanita joined her as usual.

"I'm telling Richie about the bell," Kathy said as the two girls sat down across from her at the table. "Maybe he can help us."

Just then Richie came up and dropped into a chair next to Kathy.

"What's all the mystery?" he asked, good-naturedly.

"It's about old Christ Church," Kathy told him as both Hallie and Juanita listened.

"Old Christ Church?" Richie repeated. "Why, that's been closed for years and years, Kathy."

"For nearly fifty years," Kathy told him. "Have you ever been inside it, Richie?"

Richie nodded. "About two years ago," he said. "I was only nine, then. Some of the kids found a loose board at the back basement door. Most of it is all boarded up, you know. We went inside just for a joke."

"What did you see?" Kathy asked him curiously.

Richie looked at her. "It's just an old church," he said. "I guess we really shouldn't have gone in. There's nothing there, just some old broken-down pews and chairs, and hymn books scattered around, and a lot of dust. That's all I remember."

"Did you go up into the bell tower?" Kathy asked. "Did you look at the bell?"

"We never got that far," Richie grinned. "We thought we heard somebody and we took off."

He stared at her curiously, and then he said, "What's this all about, anyway? What's so mysterious about old Christ Church?"

Kathy took a deep breath. "You've heard the story about the bell?" she asked. "How it's supposed to ring when somebody in town dies."

"Even though no one is inside ringing it," Hallie added.

Richie smiled. "That's one of those old stories," he said. "Of course nobody believes it. Besides, the bell hasn't rung, I guess, in years and years and years."

"We heard it last evening," Kathy told him slowly. "The three of us heard it, Richie."

Richie had started to take a bite out of his sandwich, but he put it down now. "You're kidding," he said.

Hallie shook her head. "The three of us heard it, Richie," she said. "We heard it twice."

"Then," Kathy added, "we learned that Grandmother Santiago over in Spanish Town where Juanita lives had died just about the time the bell rang. Isn't that right, Juanita?"

Juanita nodded.

Richie said slowly. "I didn't hear the bell ring last evening and I don't live too far from Christ Church. It's only at the edge of town. I think I would have heard it."

"It wasn't very loud," Kathy admitted. "Just a soft bong. It couldn't have been heard very far."

Richie frowned. "It could have been something else," he said.

"Like what?" Kathy asked.

"Well," Richie said, "the—the wind."

"There wasn't any wind last evening," Kathy told him. "It was very quiet."

"It could have been something else," Richie argued.

The three girls just looked at him as he started to eat his sandwich.

"You didn't get into the bell tower?" Kathy asked. "You never saw the bell close up, Richie?"

"I've seen it from the outside," Richie told her. "It—it's just hanging up there."

"But who'd want to ring it?" Kathy persisted.

Richie poured milk from his thermos. He looked at the rain on the window above them and then he said, "It's a mystery. What are you going to do about it?"

Kathy moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Solve it," she said quietly, and she saw Hallie's dark eyes widen.

"How?" Richie asked.

Kathy shook her head. "I haven't figured that out, yet," she admitted.

The four of them sat at the table eating their lunches and after a while Richie said, "What I'll have to do is go in there again and look around."

Hallie stared at him. "I wouldn't go in there in a million years," she gasped. "Richie, how could you?"

"There's no such thing as a ghost," Richie said quietly. "If that bell rang, somebody had to ring it. That's all I know."

"What about Grandmother Santiago?" Kathy asked him.

"It might have just happened that way," Richie told her. "Things like that can happen, I guess."

After lunch they went back to their classes. At

three o'clock Kathy rode the bus back home alone. Hallie had stayed after school to help her teacher on a project, and Juanita usually took an earlier bus home with the smaller children who were under her care.

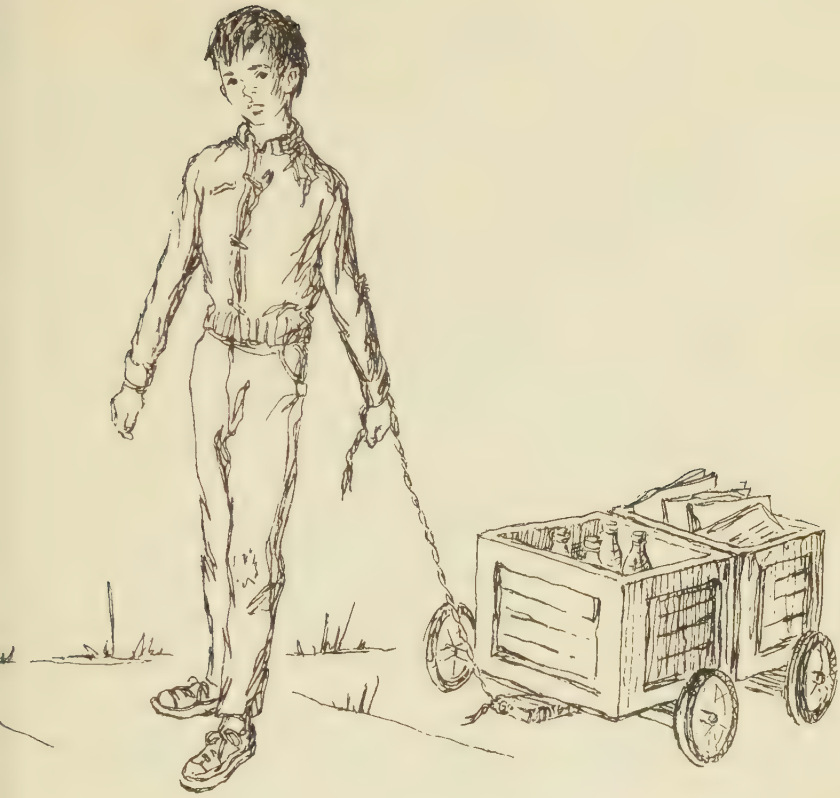
The rain had stopped but it was still a gray, dreary day with water dripping from the trees and with puddles along the walks.

Kathy's mother wasn't home when she arrived but there was a note, telling her that she'd gone over to the Grange Hall that afternoon to do some sewing.

For a while Kathy did her social studies homework and then she stepped outside on the porch and looked up and down the street. Just beyond the far end of town she could see old Christ Church.

Then she saw Luis Gonzales coming up the walk, hauling his homemade wagon. The wagon consisted of two wooden boxes nailed to a main wooden shaft, with four old baby-carriage wheels fastened to the axles of the shaft. There were some newspapers and deposit bottles in the boxes.

Luis was a familiar sight on Ryeville's main



street. For most of the summer Kathy had noticed him moving from house to house, looking for old newspapers and bottles, anything which he could sell to the junk dealer outside of town.

Kathy hadn't known Luis' name until Juanita had told her about him.

"Luis is good boy," Juanita had explained. "He live with his uncle over in Alton. They are very poor."

"Doesn't he go to school?" Kathy had asked curiously.

"He go to Alton school," Juanita had told her. "Luis' parents, they are dead. First he live with Uncle Pedro in Spanish Town, and when that uncle go back to Puerto Rico, he live with Uncle Manuel in Alton."

Kathy thought about this as she watched Luis Gonzales coming down the walk. Alton was very close to Ryeville, almost a part of it, and it seemed to her that Luis was in Ryeville about as much as he was in Alton.

The boy was rather small and frail with large brown eyes. Juanita had said that he was their age but because he was small he did not look it. He was always ready with a quick, friendly, "*Gracias*," whenever someone gave him papers or bottles.

Kathy noticed now that the cast-off clothing he was wearing this afternoon was rather wet, indicating that he'd been out in the rain for some time.

"Don't you think, Luis," she said, "that you ought to go home and change?"

Luis looked at her. He could speak English but not quite as well as Juanita.

"You're wet," Kathy told him again, pointing to his soggy jacket. "You'll catch cold."

Luis smiled, revealing white teeth. "Soon I will go," he said. "There are more papers."

Kathy gave him the old papers they had piled in the back hallway and she watched him go down the street, a frown on her face. It seemed a shame that such a nice boy as Luis Gonzales had to go all over town picking up old newspapers and bottles, and that he had to wear such old clothing. She was sure he didn't eat too well, either, because he always seemed so thin and frail, not at all like Richie Harris.

She'd heard her father talking about Spanish Town and the people who lived there, but apparently the residents of Ryeville had not been able to do too much for the Puerto Rican migrant laborers.

"For one thing," Mr. Gunn had said, "most of them are not year-round people, and it's difficult working with people who are always moving away. Quite often they come in the spring and they're gone by fall."

Kathy had begun to notice, though, that more and more of the Puerto Ricans, who worked in the potato fields and the nurseries nearby, were staying all year round, making Spanish Town their home.

"Sooner or later," her father had said, "something will have to be done about them. Conditions up on that hill are a disgrace. Some of them are even living in old, abandoned chicken houses."

Richie Harris was walking down the street now, moving slowly, and when he saw Kathy on the porch he opened the wooden gate and came up the flagstone walk. Dropping down on the top step he said, "I've been thinking about that old bell, Kathy."

"I've been thinking about it, too," Kathy told him. "That's all I can think about."

"You say you heard it ring?" Richie asked.

"We heard it," Kathy nodded. "Three of us heard it."

Richie frowned. "I can't figure it out," he said. "I don't know what could have made it ring."

"It's supposed to be a ghost bell," Kathy said with a little smile. "It just rings by itself, Richie."

Richie shook his head. "I want to find out what

made it ring," he said. "I thought I'd stop in there this afternoon."

Kathy's eyes widened. "You mean go into the church?"

Richie nodded. "I'm sure those boards are still loose at the back entrance. If there's a raccoon or something up in the bell tower I'd like to know about it."

Kathy took a deep breath. "So would I," she agreed.

"You want to go with me?" Richie asked.

Kathy stared at him and then she shivered, but she said, "I'll go, Richie."

4

The high grass and the brush in the old churchyard were long and wet from the rain as Richie and Kathy walked through it to the rear of the building. Once Kathy glanced up at the bell tower. She could see the bell quite plainly as the tower in which it hung was open on all sides.

They circled around the big maple which grew up close against the wall on one side and they stepped down the small flight of stone stairs which led to the basement entrance. Weeds were growing up inside cracks in the steps.

"Can we get in?" Kathy whispered as Richie pulled on one of the boards which had been nailed across the front of the door.

"Nothing to it," Richie said in a low voice. He yanked at one of the boards and it came loose. When he turned the doorknob the door squeaked

ominously as it swung open.

"We can slip in through here," Richie said, pulling at another board.

The opening was plenty wide enough for them to slide through. Richie went in first and Kathy followed, her heart in her throat.

It smelled musty inside and it was quite gloomy, with just a little light coming through the cobwebbed windows in the basement. Kathy could make out a scattering of broken chairs and little tables, all covered with dust.

"There's a stairway over here," Richie whispered. "Come on, Kathy."

Kathy followed him across the basement floor to the narrow stairway which led to the church auditorium upstairs.

"I'll bet nobody's been in here for years," Richie said softly.

The stairs creaked as they went up.

"Where do we come out?" Kathy asked him.

Richie was already stepping into a little room which had an old desk in it and an empty closet. There was a cloak rack against one wall with some rusted coat hangers on it.

"This must have been the choir dressing room,"

Richie whispered, "and the door here leads out to the choir loft and the platform."

He stepped through the half-open door and waited for Kathy to follow him. They were on a little platform which looked out over the auditorium. The pulpit was still in position, as were the two rows of chairs behind a low railing where the choir had sat.

Most of the pews were gone from the auditorium but a few broken ones still remained, scattered about the room. Dim light filtered through colored glass windows.

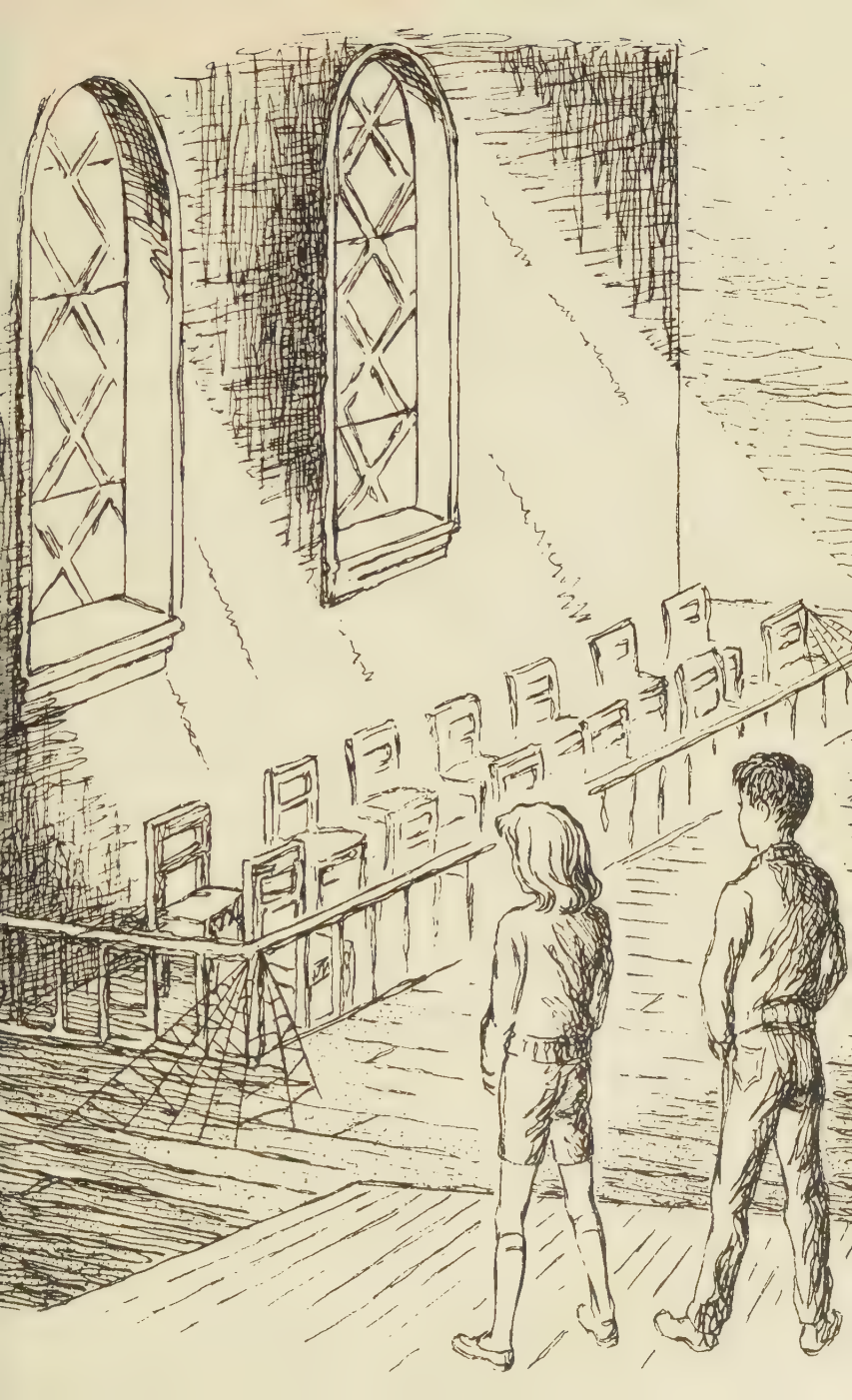
It was very still and Kathy was sure she could hear her heart beating.

"What I want to do," Richie was saying softly, "is get up to that bell tower. There's a stairway leading to it. I saw it the last time I was in here. It's at the other end of the building. Come on, Kathy."

Kathy took one step down off the platform and then she stopped, scarcely breathing now.

"*Richie?*" she whispered.

"What's the matter?" Richie asked her. He glanced back at her curiously.



"I—I heard something," Kathy said in a hollow voice.

The two of them stood very still, scarcely breathing, listening.

"I think you're imagining things," Richie told her "Come on. Let's go, Kathy. We can't stop now."

Kathy was thinking that she could stop any time she wanted and dash back toward the basement door and out into the yard. She was beginning to wish now that she hadn't come here. She was positive that she'd heard something overhead in the direction of the bell tower.

Gritting her teeth, though, she followed Richie down toward the other end of the auditorium. Then she heard it again, and this time Richie heard it, too, because he stopped immediately and turned to look at Kathy.

"Steps!" Kathy whispered. "*Footsteps!*"

There was no question about it now. Someone was walking around overhead. The steps were loud and clear!

Kathy felt herself trembling all over. The steps were coming down the stairs from the tower.

"Richie!" she whispered. "*Richie!*"

Her legs were weak and she could scarcely breathe.

The steps were coming closer, coming down the stairs, and in another moment the door ahead of them would open and they would be confronted by the walker.

They were slow, heavy steps, making the stairs creak.

"Let's run," Richie whispered.

"I—I can't," Kathy pleaded. "Richie, I *can't!*"

It was as if her shoes were nailed to the floor.

The terrible steps came closer and closer. Now they were on the landing. They could hear a hand on the door knob. It was turning!

"Richie!" Kathy screamed.

5

The door opened and a tall figure was outlined against the dim light that filtered down the stairs from the bell tower. Kathy closed her eyes, terrified.

"Mr. Gunn!" Richie shouted. "Kathy, it's your *father*."

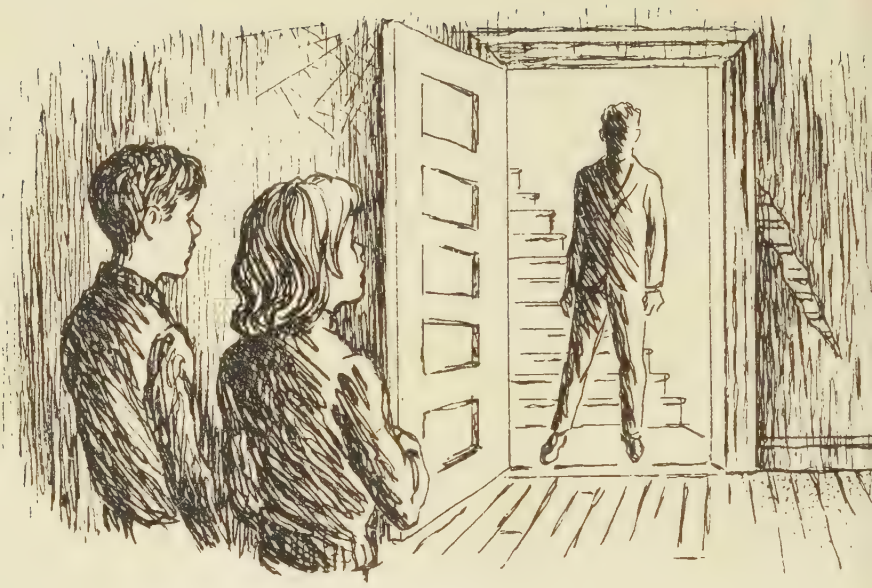
Kathy looked and recognized her father standing there, and she sat down on the floor, too weak to move.

"Kathy!" Mr. Gunn cried, running toward her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right, Dad," Kathy whispered. "I—I guess I was just frightened."

"But what are you doing in here?" Mr. Gunn asked her, helping her to her feet.

Richie said shame-facedly, "I guess it's my fault, Mr. Gunn. Kathy was telling me about the bell



and I wanted to go up into the tower and have a look at it."

"That's just what I was doing," Mr. Gunn told them. "I've known that Kathy was worried about this and I thought if I could find the explanation she would forget about it."

Kathy said in a low voice, "I just didn't think about you being up there, Dad."

"Well, I got off early this afternoon," her father explained, "and I got the key from Mr. Darrow, the caretaker. I was up in the room below the tower looking around."

"Did you see anything?" Richie asked quickly.

Mr. Gunn shook his head. "Nothing up there," he said. "It's just impossible for anyone to have rung the bell. To begin with, there's no rope leading from the bell to the room below. I guess the old bell rope just rotted away."

"Somebody could have given it a push," Richie suggested.

Again Mr. Gunn shook his head. "There is a heavy padlock on the trapdoor leading up onto the tower platform," he said. "The padlock is rusted and full of cobwebs. No one has been on the bell platform for a great many years."

Richie looked at Kathy but didn't say anything.

"Now," Mr. Gunn warned, "I wouldn't come in here again. In the first place you are trespassing on private property, and it's against the law, and it could be dangerous. I think the next time the town board meets I'm going to recommend that this old building be taken down."

"But we heard the bell," Kathy said slowly.

Mr. Gunn frowned. "The dust on the floor in the room below the tower must have been a quarter of an inch thick, Kathy," he stated. "No one has been up there in at least thirty years. And

there's no rope from the tower to the room below. It's impossible to ring the bell from below and it's impossible to get into the tower without a very long ladder, a fireman's ladder, at the least."

Richie said slowly, "Well, Kathy, I guess you were imagining things."

Kathy was very quiet as they left the church building. Mr. Gunn locked the front door behind them and they walked across the wet grass to the little rusted gate and then out onto the street again.

Mr. Gunn took the key back to the caretaker, and Kathy and Richie walked slowly down the street after he'd driven off. They saw Luis Gonzales coming toward them pulling his little wagon and when he saw them he slowed down.

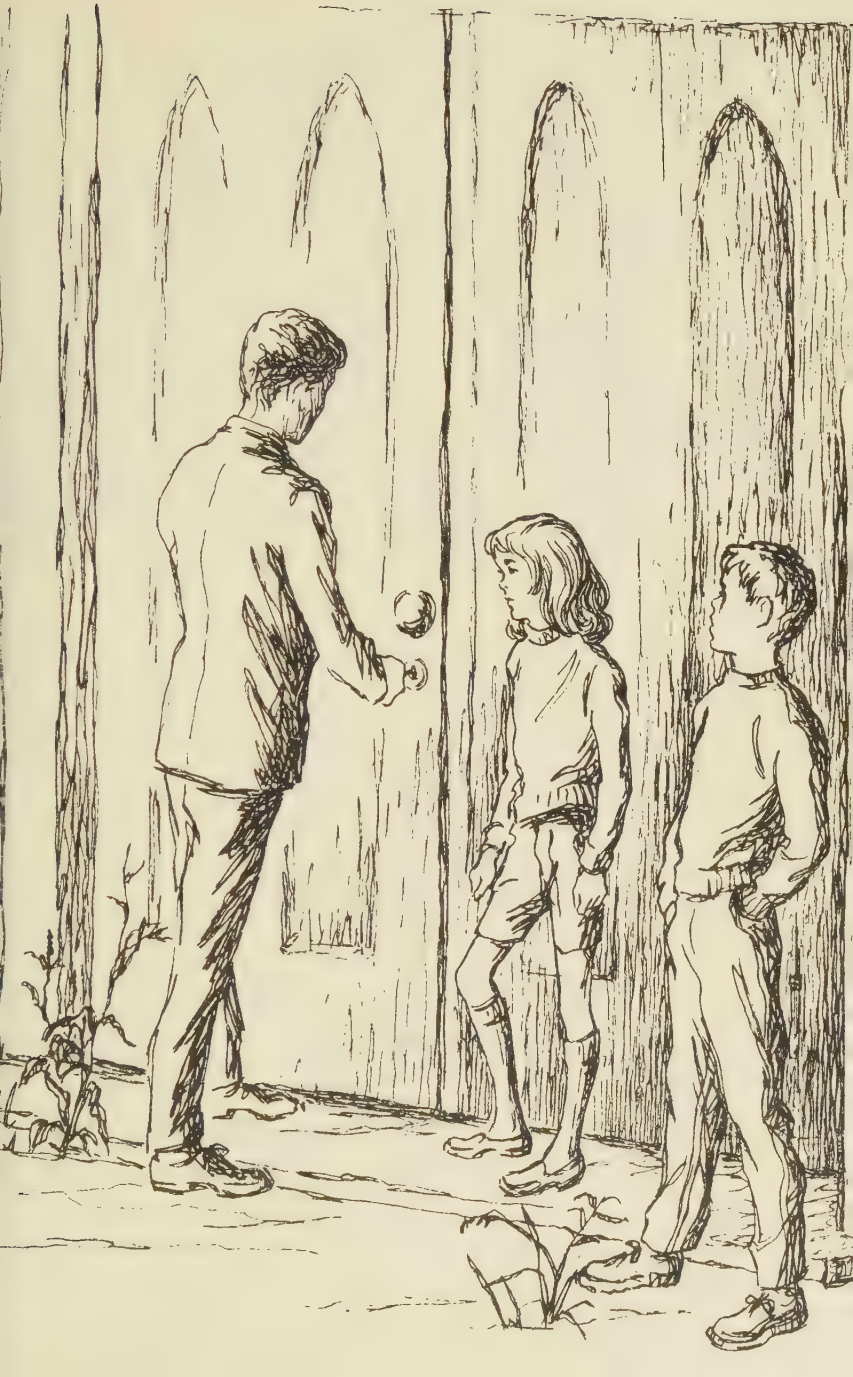
"*Buenas tardes*," Luis smiled.

"Hello, Luis," Richie said. "How are you doing?"

"I get more papers," Luis told them. "I get many papers."

"Can you really make any money on old newspapers?" Richie asked as Kathy only half-listened, her mind still on the bell tower and the ghost bell.

"I make some money," Luis told him. "I take papers out to junkman now."



"You'd better get going," Richie told him. "It'll be dark soon, Luis."

Luis moved off with his wagon and Kathy and Richie walked on down the street. Kathy said slowly, "We heard the bell ring, Richie."

Richie stared at her. "There's just no way anybody could have rung it," he said. "You heard what your father said, Kathy."

"I know," Kathy told him, "but—but we heard it, Richie, just the same."

The next morning was Saturday and Kathy had arranged to meet Hallie and Juanita and go to

nearby Loon Lake for a picnic. Very soon the cold weather would be coming and they wouldn't be able to visit the lake where quite often they went bathing on hot, summer days.

On the way up the hill to Spanish Town, Kathy told Hallie about how she had gone inside the old church with Richie Harris and about her father coming down the stairs.

Hallie stared, open-mouthed. "You mean you really went inside, Kathy?" she asked.

"I guess we shouldn't have," Kathy admitted, "and it was our own fault that my father scared us."

"I think I would have died," Hallie confessed.

"Dad didn't find anything in the building," Kathy went on. "He said the trap door leading up to the bell tower had been locked for a good many years. He said he was sure that no one had been in the tower."

Hallie looked at her. "We didn't say anybody had ever been *in* the tower," she said. "It was just that the—the ghost bell rang."

Kathy frowned. "Ghost bell," she said slowly. "You don't mean to say you believe in ghosts, Hallie?"

"Who," Hallie asked, "or *what* rang the bell, Kathy?"

Kathy frowned. "Well," she admitted, "I don't know yet, Hallie."

"Then it could have been a ghost," Hallie said triumphantly.

"Oh, Hallie," Kathy scowled.

As they approached the collection of old buildings, shacks and wire fences which had once comprised a chicken ranch, Kathy saw Juanita playing out in front of one of the buildings with her two smaller sisters. Juanita's house had been a chicken house once. It was a long, low, wooden building

covered with tarpaper, with just a few windows in it.

"Isn't it a shame," Kathy said in a low voice to Hallie, "that Juanita has to live in a house like that. It must be very cold inside when the snow comes."

"I wouldn't want to live here," Hallie admitted. "Why, even our garage is nicer than that, Kathy."

They saw Luis Gonzales coming toward them with his empty wagon. He was wearing his old straw hat and he had his head down, walking slowly, shoulders sagging.

Hallie said to him as he came up, "Luis, we have some more newspapers for you if you want to stop at our house."

"*Si,*" Luis' smile was quick, though Kathy thought his face looked pinched and pale.

"I wish," Hallie complained, "that people would stop saying *si* around here. I keep looking for something."

"*Gracias,*" Luis told her. "I weel come for newspapers."

Juanita ran toward them now, carrying a beautiful little cinnamon-colored kitten.

"Juanita!" Kathy exclaimed, forgetting all about Luis. "Where did you get that adorable kitten?"

"It was Grandmother Santiago's," Juanita told her. "Mr. Santiago, he is going back to Puerto Rico. He ask me if I will keep her."

Kathy held the tiny kitten in her arms and it emitted a faint, plaintive *meow*.

"Isn't she a darling?" Hallie laughed.

"I will get lunch," Juanita told them. "You will mind Chiquita?"

"Is that her name?" Kathy asked. "Chiquita?"

"It is good name," Juanita told her.

She came out in a little while with her paper bag of lunch and the three girls headed toward

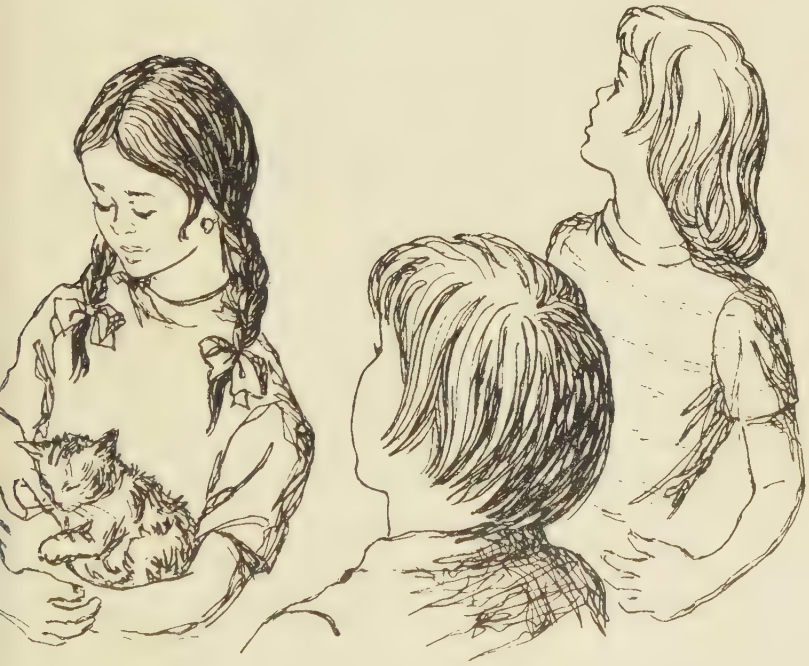
Loon Lake which was about a mile from town.

They had to pass old Christ Church on the way down from Spanish Town and as Juanita was looking up at the tower, Kathy told her what had happened the previous afternoon.

"No one was there?" Juanita said slowly, when Kathy had finished.

"We didn't see a thing," Kathy admitted.

"There is something," Juanita said slowly.



Kathy looked at her. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"My friend, Margarita," Juanita said quietly. "I tell her last night about the bell. She tell me what she see when she come home with her brother last week at night."

"You mean she saw something?" Hallie gasped.

"Margarita see light in church," Juanita told them. "Her brother drive old car past church and Margarita see light. But it go out when she tell her brother. He do not believe it."

"A *light*," Kathy whispered. "First a bell, and then a light in an empty church!"

"It was the ghost," Hallie said with conviction.

"Oh, please," Kathy scolded, "You know there are no ghosts, Hallie."

"Whatever it was," Hallie murmured.

"Are you sure Margarita saw it?" Kathy asked.

Juanita made the Sign of the Cross. "Margarita is very sure," she said. "She see small light and it go out quickly. Her brother will not believe." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "The eyes sometimes see things that are not there."

Kathy looked at the old church and then up at the bell tower with its silent bell. She wondered

what her father would say if she went to him now with the story of the light in the building at night.

"It's no use telling anybody." Hallie seemed to echo her thoughts. "Who will believe us?"

Juanita said slowly, "The bell, she ring, and Grandmother Santiago, she die."

Kathy looked at Hallie who was staring up at the bell as if hypnotized.

"I—I guess we'd better go," Kathy murmured.

They went on out to the lake.

6

At Loon Lake the girls ate at one of the picnic tables and they played with little Chiquita who had come along in Juanita's arms. They watched the kitten chase a squirrel, seeming surprised when the squirrel scampered up into a tree.

Once Juanita had to climb a little tree to bring the kitten down.

Hallie said, "They're always doing that, Juanita, climbing trees, I mean."

"Maybe," Kathy smiled, "you ought to put a little collar and chain on Chiquita until she gets older."

"I will hold her," Juanita promised.

It was late afternoon when they started back from the lake and as they were walking down the road toward town, Richie Harris came up behind them on his bicycle.

"You out at the lake, too?" Kathy asked him, noticing the knapsack tied to the bike.

"Out beyond the lake," he said. "Just getting back."

Hallie said to Richie, "Were you scared, Richie, when you heard Mr. Gunn coming down from the bell tower?"

Richie grinned. "I was scared," he admitted. "Now that it's all over, I realize how foolish I was."

"Maybe not," Hallie said mysteriously.

Richie glanced over at her curiously. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Kathy told him about the light Margarita had seen in the church building at night.

"A light?" Richie murmured. "You mean she could see it through the colored-glass window?"

"*Si*," Juanita told him. "Margarita see the light. It come and go."

"Her older brother didn't see it," Hallie added, "so of course he didn't believe she saw it, either. Isn't that just like grown-ups?"

Richie shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "We didn't see anything in there, did we, Kathy?"

"Nothing at all," Kathy agreed. "Of course,

though, we didn't look around very much. We heard the steps right away."

Hallie glanced up at the sky which was red and streaked with purple, the way it had been the night they'd heard the mysterious bell. She said slowly, "Do—do you think, Kathy, we might hear it again now when we go by?"

Juanita shook her head and held little Chiquita

tightly in her arms. "I will not listen," she said.

The four moved over a rise in the road and looked down into Ryeville, less than a quarter of a mile away. The old church stood at the edge of town, surrounded by its little churchyard and rickety iron fence.

From here, on top of the grade, Kathy could look right through the bell tower. The bell was

outlined against the sky.

Who made the bell ring? she asked herself. *What was the mysterious light Margarita had seen?*

They started down the road slowly, no one speaking now, Richie wheeling his bike back and forth across the grade so that he wouldn't be going too fast.

At the bottom of the hill he waited for the girls to come up, and he sat on the bike seat, one foot on the ground, looking toward the church which was about fifty yards away.

When the girls came up to him, he said quietly, "I'm listening for that bell."

Hallie said, "It only rings, Richie, when someone dies."

"You're not going inside, are you?" Kathy asked anxiously.

Richie shook his head. "I told your father I wouldn't go in again," he said.

Juanita said fearfully, "It is bad place to go."

Kathy said, "A church can't be a bad place, Juanita. It's just that there's a mystery here and we haven't found out what it is."

They walked on toward the church, all four of

them very quiet as they stared up at the bell tower. Kathy had the spooky feeling that the building was staring back at her. It was very foolish, of course, but she couldn't get rid of this thought, the feeling of eyes upon her.

As they drew near the rusted, wrought-iron fence, she felt her heart begin to beat faster. Richie parked his bike at the side of the road and walked over to the fence. He stood there, looking up at the tower.

"Where were you standing, Kathy," he asked, "when you heard the bell?"

"Farther down," Kathy told him. "It was on this side of the building, but farther down, by those old lilac bushes."

Richie walked on along the fence, the three girls following him.

A car went by on the road, and then farther down along the main street they saw some lights going on in the houses. The sky was scarlet. Just then the setting sun, striking the windows at a new angle, turned them blood red for the moment.

"Look at the windows!" Hallie gave a little scream. "Isn't it horrible?"

"It's just a reflection," Kathy told her.

She stood next to Richie, who was leaning against the iron fence, staring at the bell in the tower.

"There's no wind tonight," he was saying. "No breeze. There's no way at all of making that bell ring."

Just as he spoke, though, the four of them heard the low, hollow, very soft bong of the bell. The shivers ran up and down Kathy's spine. Her hands gripping the iron fence were clammy.

Hallie was saying in a quivering voice. "Kathy —Kathy! Did you hear it?"

Kathy looked at Richie. He was staring up, jaw sagging, the unbelief in his eyes. There was no doubt that he'd heard the bell ring, also.

Juanita had already started to run toward the road, clutching her kitten under her arm. Hallie started to run, also, and then Richie said in a low voice,

"I guess we'd better go, Kathy."

"Did you hear it?" Kathy whispered as they hurried back to the road.

"I heard it," Richie nodded. "It wasn't the way a real bell would ring, but I heard it."

"Juanita," Hallie called. "Wait for us."

Juanita was almost sobbing. "Someone has die," she said. "*Someone has die.*"

"My goodness," Hallie whispered. "I forgot about that part of it. The last time it was Grandmother Santiago."

Richie said, "It's impossible, Kathy. There's no way that bell could ring. Nobody could get up there and there's no rope. There's no wind tonight. Nothing at all."

"Nothing at all," Hallie said in a scared voice, "except ghosts."

The four children moved past the church and when they reached the path which led to Spanish Town, Juanita started to run toward home, waving to Hallie and Kathy, not looking back.

"What are we going to do, Kathy?" Hallie asked. "Nobody would believe us the first time."

"Richie heard it, too," Kathy observed, "and that makes one more."

Richie got on his bike and rode on ahead of the two girls, moving very slowly, as if in thought. He waited for Kathy to come up and then he said, "Are you going to tell anybody?"

"Are you?" Kathy asked.

Richie shook his head. "I'm going to wait," he

said, "and see what happens. Maybe we'll see the light."

Hallie said, "I'm not going to tell anybody, either, Kathy, because nobody will believe me. But I know what I heard."

They came up on the sidewalk and headed down the street toward their homes. Once Kathy looked back at the old church. The windows on this side were now dark, black. She felt as if they were staring at her, watching every move she made. She shivered but said nothing to Hallie or to Richie.

On Sunday afternoon Kathy was sitting on the porch glider going through the newspaper very carefully page by page. Her mother, sitting in a rocking chair on the other side of the porch, watched her curiously for a while. Finally, she said, "I've never seen you read a paper like that before, Kathy. Are you looking for anything in particular?"

Kathy wished her mother hadn't asked her, but it was a question and she had to answer it.

"I—I was trying to find out if anyone died in Ryeville yesterday," she said.

Her mother looked at her. "Does that mean you

heard the bell again?" she asked.

Kathy nodded slowly. "We were going past last evening," she said, "on the way back from the lake. We—we heard it."

"Your father was up there," Mrs. Gunn said. "He told us there wasn't any rope to the bell, and no one could get up into the tower."

"I know," Kathy said miserably.

"And you still think you heard it?"

"Richie heard it, too," Kathy said. "He was with us this time."

Her mother started to rock slowly. Then she said, "I guess you know, Kathy, that if you want to hear a thing badly enough you can hear it, don't you?"

"I—I guess so," Kathy said.

"And I think," Mrs. Gunn went on, "you girls were very anxious to hear the bell, weren't you? You've been thinking about it a great deal because it has been on your minds."

"I suppose so," Kathy admitted.

"Did anybody die yesterday in town?" her mother asked.

"I didn't read anything about it," Kathy said. She added, "Grandmother Santiago died when the

bell rang the first time."

"Who is Grandmother Santiago?" her mother asked curiously. "You haven't told me about that, Kathy."

"She lived in Spanish Town," Kathy explained. "Juanita knew her. She was very old and she died right about the time we heard the bell ring."

"I see," Mrs. Gunn said.

Kathy put the paper down, pushing the glider with her feet, staring out at the street.

"I wouldn't think about it too much if I were

you," her mother was saying, "Even if Grandmother Santiago did pass away, it probably just happened. She was very old, you said. Now you say you heard the bell last evening, but no one died in town."

"Not in town," Kathy admitted. "We don't know about Spanish Town, Mother."

"There are only about seventy-five people in Spanish Town," Mrs. Gunn said. "Most of the migrant workers are gone for the winter. I doubt if anyone has died over there, Kathy."

Kathy just nodded. Later on she saw her mother talking with her father in the back garden where her father was tying up some chrysanthemums. She was sure they were talking about her.

Mr. Gunn said to her later in the evening, "I wouldn't worry too much about that bell, Kathy. Just concentrate on your schoolwork and things like that."

"I'll try to, Dad," Kathy promised.

She meant it, too, but she knew that it was going to be very difficult. It was just impossible to forget the bell and Christ Church.

7

On monday morning when Juanita boarded the school bus the first thing Kathy said to her was, "Did anybody die in Spanish Town?"

Juanita shook her head.

Kathy took a deep breath. Hallie, who was sitting next to her, said, "Nobody died in Ryeville, either. I went through the whole paper yesterday."

"So did I," Kathy nodded.

"Well," Hallie said slowly, "nobody died."

"The bell, she ring," Juanita said.

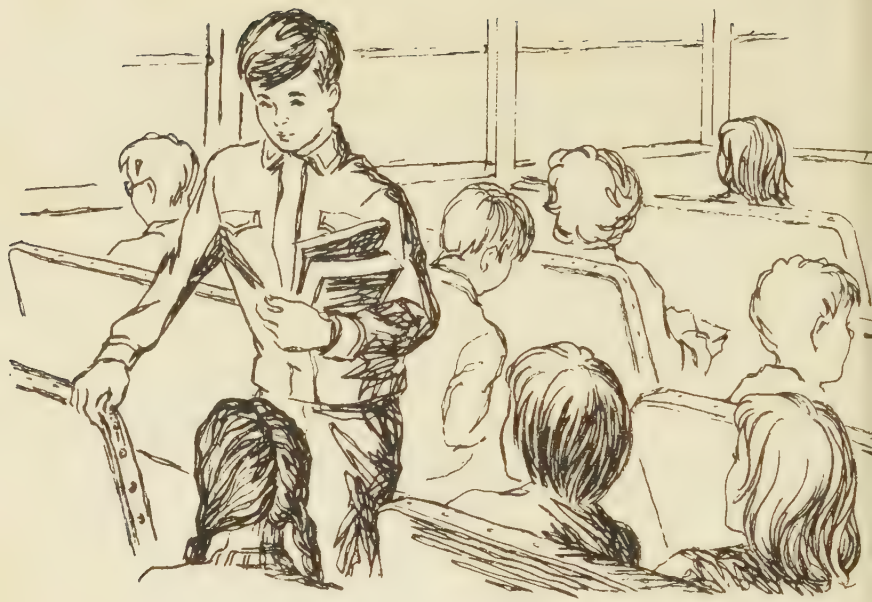
Richie, who had been in the front of the bus talking to a friend, came down toward them now, dropping into his seat across the aisle.

"Hi," Richie said.

"Nobody died," Hallie told him in a low voice.

Richie looked at her and then nodded.

Kathy said to him, "We did hear the bell, didn't



we, Richie?"

Richie nodded. "The bell rang," he said briefly.

The three girls looked at each other and then Hallie took a deep breath.

"All right," she said, a frown of concentration on her face. "It rang."

"That's not the point," Kathy told her. "*Who* made it ring?"

"The ghost," Hallie said flatly.

Kathy just looked at her. She said to Richie, "If nobody died that means the legend isn't true."

"I don't believe in legends," Richie said. "That's

just something somebody made up years and years ago."

A friend of Richie's was getting onto the bus, dropping into a seat next to him, so they stopped talking about the ghost bell.

All during classes that day, though, Kathy's mind was on the bell and not too much on her subjects. Once Mrs. Mason, her social studies teacher, caught her staring out the window, and she said pleasantly,

"Daydreaming, Kathy?"

"Oh," Kathy said, surprised. "I'm sorry. I was just thinking, Mrs. Mason."

"That's what a daydream is," her teacher laughed.

Later that afternoon, when Kathy got off the bus, she glanced down in the direction of old Christ Church. It looked exactly what it was in the bright sunshine—just an old church building, long closed, completely harmless.

When she got home she noticed that her mother had set out a bundle of old newspapers for Luis Gonzales to pick up.

"Have you seen Luis?" her mother asked, when she came into the house. "I told him I'd have some

papers and bottles for him if he came around today, but he hasn't come."

"He may be along later," Kathy said.

She forgot about Luis Gonzales until the next morning when Juanita got on the bus. Juanita saw that her little charges were all seated and hurried down to Kathy and Hallie. Kathy noticed immediately that Juanita was very excited about something. The little Puerto Rican girl started off in Spanish before she settled down.

"Juanita," Hallie objected. "I can't understand you."

"It is Luis," Juanita said, switching languages. "I am so afraid. It is Luis."

"Luis Gonzales?" Kathy asked.

"He is gone," Juanita almost cried. "Luis is gone."

"What do you mean, gone?" Hallie asked. "You think he ran away?"

"*Quien sabe?*" Juanita murmured. "*We* do not know."

"Doesn't his uncle know where he is?" Kathy asked.

"Luis' Uncle Pedro go back to Puerto Rico after crops are picked," Juanita explained. "Luis did not

go with him. We think he is with Uncle Manuel in Alton, but now we find out he is not."

Hallie asked, exasperated, "Well, if he's not with his uncle where do you think he's gone, Juanita?"

"No one has seen Luis," Juanita said slowly, "since Saturday."

Kathy stared at her. "Saturday?" she repeated. "You mean *late Saturday afternoon?*"

Hallie let out a low moan. "The ghost bell," she whispered. "That was what we heard—the ghost bell!"

Kathy found her voice, "Do—do you think Luis is *dead?*" she asked Juanita.

"He is gone," Juanita cried. "No one has seen him since Saturday when the bell, she ring."

"This is terrible," Hallie gasped. "What are we going to do, Kathy? The—the bell *got* Luis!"

"Don't be silly," Kathy scolded. "A bell can't *get* anyone. How can a bell harm anybody?"

"You know what I mean," Hallie told her.

Kathy said, "Do you think we ought to tell Sheriff Harper?"

Richie had been doing some last minute studying, but he turned to the girls when Hallie reached across the aisle and poked him. She blurted out,

"The bell got Luis Gonzales, Richie."

Richie's brown eyes widened. "*What?*" he asked.

Kathy explained briefly about the disappearance of Luis.

"Juanita says that no one has seen him since Saturday," she finished, "at about the time we heard the bell ring."

Richie looked at Juanita. "He may have just gone off visiting somebody," he suggested.

Juanita shook her head. "Luis doesn't know anyone to visit," she said, "except the people in Span-

ish Town. Every day we see him with wagon. We think he is living with uncle in Alton, but no. His Uncle Manuel, he is gone to Puerto Rico long time."

Richie looked at Kathy.

"He didn't come around yesterday to pick up the papers," Kathy said. "Mother had some papers ready for him."

"He may turn up, yet," Richie said dubiously.

Juanita shook her head. "Every day we see Luis," she said slowly. "Every day. Now we no see him."

"I think somebody should know about it," Kathy said. "If both Luis' uncles went back to Puerto Rico, it means that Luis is all alone now."

"That's why the bell got him," Hallie said emphatically.

Kathy frowned. "Will you stop talking like that, Hallie!"

"Juanita believes it," Hallie defended herself. "Don't you, Juanita?"

"*Si*," Juanita said.

"See? There," Hallie said triumphantly.

"Doesn't Luis have any other relatives in Spanish Town?" Richie asked Juanita.

"There is cousin," Juanita explained, "but they go back to Puerto Rico and they think Luis stay with Uncle Manuel. Luis live with many people since his parents die. Sometimes they do not know who he live with."

"He must be somewhere," Richie asserted. "Maybe he's with another relative in Alton."

"There is no other relative in Alton," Juanita told him.

"That leaves only the bell," Hallie whispered, "and the ghost."

"The bell doesn't *do* anything," Richie said with a smile.

"When we find Luis I'll believe that," Hallie told him tersely.

Kathy said to Juanita, "I'll go home with you this afternoon, Juanita. We'll kind of ask around about Luis before we start telling people he has been carried off or something."

8

KATHY WENT BACK to Spanish Town with Juanita that afternoon and again she was depressed by the collection of old shacks. Many of them were unoccupied now, with the migrants having gone back to Puerto Rico for the winter, but others had people living in them, some with the windows boarded up, and smoke coming up from tiny chimneys thrust through the roofs.

They visited Luis Gonzales' cousin, who had first told Juanita that Luis was gone. The house was another former chicken house, flat roof, a stove-pipe protruding through a broken window. There were pretty curtains on another window, though. The young cousin, who had a baby in her arms when they called, was trying to make her home look as nice as she could.

It was a one-room house which served as kitchen,

dining room, and bedroom all in one. There was an oil heater, an old kitchen table and chairs, and some cots all squeezed in. There was no running water. Kathy had noticed the pump in the back where the family got their water.

Mrs. Gonzales could speak no English and Juanita had to talk with her in Spanish. When they'd finished, Juanita said to Kathy, "Luis has not been

with them. He come to visit, sometimes, but they think he live with uncle in Alton. Now they know Uncle Manuel has gone back to Puerto Rico long time ago. They do not know where he is." She looked away sadly, and she said, "It is the bell."

"Don't be silly, Juanita," Kathy scolded. "You can't start thinking like that."

"I do not wish to think," Juanita told her, "but Grandmother Santiago she is dead, and Luis now is gone."

"We don't know that he's dead," Kathy told her. "He may have just gone off somewhere."

"He has never go off before," Juanita said. "Every day we see Luis with his wagon."

"Have you seen the wagon?" Kathy asked suddenly.

Juanita shook her head. "Luis is gone," she said, "and the wagon is gone."

Kathy saw the tears welling up into her eyes now.

"Please, Juanita," she said, "it isn't going to do any good to cry. I'm sure we're going to find him."

"I do not hope he is dead," Juanita said in her peculiar English, and Kathy knew what she meant.

"I hope he's all right, too," Kathy assured her.

"Now don't worry about it, Juanita."

She was worrying, herself, though, worrying very much. It seemed that things were getting worse all of the time.

That night at the supper table Kathy told her father about Luis.

"No one has seen him in Spanish Town since Saturday," she said, "and Juanita is worried."

"Doesn't he live with relatives?" her father asked.

"Most of his relatives have gone back to Puerto Rico," Kathy explained. "Everybody kind of forgot about him."

Mr. Gunn frowned. He looked at his wife and he said, "I think I'd better notify Sheriff Harper. Probably the boy has just taken off somewhere but we can't be sure."

"He's such a nice boy," Mrs. Gunn was saying. "I do hope nothing has happened to him. He always worked so hard, too."

"We'll keep an eye out for him," Mr. Gunn said. "I don't imagine anything serious has happened, but you never know. He just doesn't seem like the kind of boy who would run off."

After supper that night Kathy went up to her room and sat down to do her homework. It was a long time, though, before she could concentrate on her books. There were so many other things on her mind—the church bell, the light inside the church, and now Luis, who had been gone ever since the bell sounded.

In the morning, as she was standing at the bus stop with Hallie, they saw Sheriff Harper's car rolling by, headed out toward Spanish Town.

"My father called up Sheriff Harper about Luis," Kathy explained. "I guess he's going up the hill to

ask some questions."

"Suppose they never find him?" Hallie asked in a low voice. "Suppose he has disappeared forever?"

Kathy felt a little sick, just thinking about it.

When Juanita got on the bus the first question Kathy asked was, "Did Luis come back?"

Juanita shook her head. "He is gone," she said.

When Richie got on the bus Kathy said to him, "My father told Sheriff Harper. We just saw him going out to Spanish Town."

"Let's hope he finds something," Richie told her.

When the children got off the bus in front of the school Kathy walked with Juanita toward the door, and she could see that her friend was very much upset.

"I dream about Luis," Juanita said in a low voice. "I dream he need help."

Kathy patted her shoulder. "Don't worry too much about it," she tried to console Juanita. "I'm sure it'll work out all right."

Juanita didn't say anything as they entered the school.

When Kathy got back that afternoon she asked her mother immediately if they'd had any news from Sheriff Harper.

"We haven't heard anything, yet," her mother replied. "I saw the sheriff's car go by at noon. It does take awhile, dear, to investigate things like this."

Kathy nodded. She kept thinking about the dream Juanita had had. It had been on her mind all day in school. What if Luis really did need help?

After awhile she went out on the porch and sat on the glider, rocking gently, watching the leaves blowing about on the lawn.

Her mother left to drive over to Alton for a meeting of her garden club which was preparing prize chrysanthemums for competition at the county fair.

"I'll be back about supper time," Mrs. Gunn told Kathy. "The roast is in the oven."

"All right," Kathy nodded. "I'll set the table, Mom."

After her mother had driven off she sat on the glider, looking up and down the street, the trouble in her eyes.

Little Artie Bowers, who lived two houses away, was coming along the sidewalk, a long stick in his hand. He was swishing at leaves along the walk.

Artie was about six years old, a small, freckled boy, rather mischievous. Artie pulled up outside the fence in front of the Gunn residence and stared at Kathy for awhile in silence.

"What's the matter?" Kathy asked him.

"Know what I found?" Artie asked.

"What?" Kathy wanted to know, not particularly interested.

"Luis' wagon," Artie told her, and Kathy's heart skipped a beat.

She stood up. "Luis' wagon?" she repeated, her throat dry. "Where, Artie? Where?"

"In that old churchyard," the boy said. "You can hardly see it from the fence because the weeds are so high, but I saw it."

"In the old churchyard?" Kathy repeated.

Artie pointed down the street toward old Christ Church. "That one," he said.

"You—you didn't see Luis?" Kathy asked him hopefully.

Artie shook his head. "Just the wagon," he said.

Kathy stared down the street toward the old church, and suddenly she jumped off the porch and ran past the startled little boy and up the street in the direction of her father's office.

When she reached the office, though, her father's secretary said, "I'm afraid your father's out of town, Kathy. He had to go up to Wiltshire this afternoon. Is it anything important?"

Kathy shook her head. "I—I'll tell him when he comes home," she said.

She went downstairs and out onto the street again. As she came out of the building she noticed that the sun which had been playing hide-and-seek among the clouds that afternoon was gone for good. In another hour or so it would be dark.

She was thinking rapidly now. If Luis' little wagon was in the churchyard, did that mean that Luis was in the church? If not, what was the wagon doing in the churchyard? Luis and his

wagon were inseparable. Kathy didn't remember ever seeing Luis Gonzales without the wagon.

She walked down the street slowly, her mind in a whirl, and then she saw Richie coming toward her on his bicycle.

"Richie!" she shouted, and Richie was so startled the front wheel of the bike wobbled for a moment.

"What's the matter?" he asked as he pulled up near her.

Kathy told him, the words tumbling out rapidly.

"In the churchyard?" Richie repeated when she'd finished.

"That's where little Artie saw the wagon," Kathy told him. "I tried to tell father but he's out of town. I don't see Sheriff Harper's car near the office, either. What—what are we going to do, Richie?"

Richie thought for a moment and then he said quietly, "Let's just make sure the wagon is really down there and it is Luis' wagon. Come on, Kathy."

Kathy ran beside him as he turned the bike around and headed down the street.

As they went by Hallie's house, Hallie called to them from the yard where she was raking leaves.

Kathy waved to her excitedly.

"Come on," she called. "Come on, Hallie!"

"What's the matter?" Hallie panted, running up.

"We've found Luis' wagon," Kathy explained. "It's over in the old churchyard."

Hallie blinked, blue eyes widening. "In the churchyard?" she repeated.

"We're going down to make sure," Kathy told her. "Come on, Hallie."

"Oh, my goodness," Hallie mumbled. "I don't really want to go."

She hurried on behind Kathy, though.

Richie was a little ahead of them, wheeling his bike slowly so that they could keep up with him.

When they reached the churchyard he stepped down from the bike and leaned it against the rusted iron fence. Kathy stared up at the bell tower, her heart beating fast now.

"Did little Artie tell you where he saw the wagon?" Richie asked.

Kathy shook her head.

They saw Juanita running toward them now, from the direction of Spanish Town. Juanita was waving with one hand, while Chiquita, the kitten, dangled from the other.

"What do you do?" Juanita panted. "I see you from my house."

"We think we've found Luis' wagon," Kathy told her. "It's supposed to be here in the churchyard."

Juanita's brown eyes widened and she stared at Kathy.

"What is it doing in churchyard?" she asked in surprise.

Kathy shook her head. "We're trying to find out," she said.

Richie was walking along the fence now, searching the tall grass and weeds. Suddenly he called, "There it is."

Kathy came up behind him, Hallie and Juanita sticking close to her.

Luis' wagon was almost hidden among the weeds in the yard. A bundle of papers, soggy from the rain, was in the wagon. There was nothing else.

"Where is Luis?" Juanita asked, her voice trembling.

"What are we going to do?" Kathy wanted to know. "It's getting dark, Richie."

Richie stared at the wagon and then up at the old building. There was a frown on his face.

"Maybe he just left the wagon here," he said, but he didn't sound too convincing.

"If the wagon's here, Luis is here," Kathy told him.

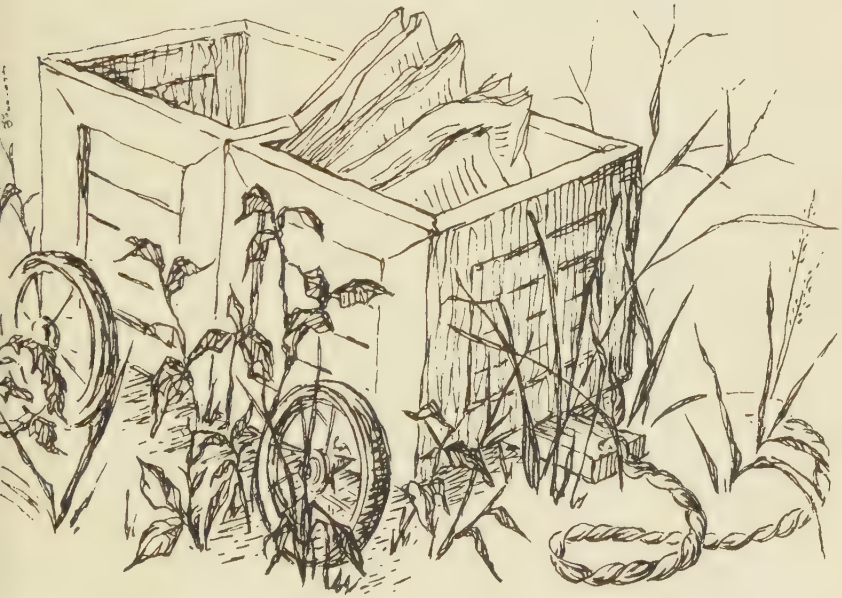
She looked up at the silent bell in the bell tower.

"If it rings now I'll die," Hallie whispered.

"I'm going inside," Richie said slowly.

"*Inside?*" Kathy gasped.

"I know we're not supposed to," Richie told her, "but if Luis is around here somewhere we have to find him."



Kathy took a deep breath. "I'm going with you," she said suddenly, following him as he walked up to the old iron gate, which was ajar.

Not willing to be left alone, Hallie and Juanita came on behind, but at a distance.

Richie made his way toward the rear of the building to the basement door which he'd entered with Kathy on their last visit.

When he stepped down the few stone steps to the door he paused and called loudly, "Luis—Luis?"

The three girls standing nearby listened intently. Hallie was shaking with fright and Kathy could hear Juanita breathing heavily at her elbow.

Long shadows were stealing across the churchyard. Lights were blinking on in town.

Hallie said in a low voice, "Kathy, I'm afraid. I'm not going in there."

"Then wait outside," Kathy told her, her own voice shaking.

"Luis?" Richie called again. "Luis Gonzales?"

There was no answer and Kathy watched Richie slip between the two loose boards. Kathy hesitated, took a deep breath, and then followed him.

"Kathy?" Hallie called from outside, "be—be careful!"

It seemed even darker in the basement than it had been the last time they'd been here.

"Watch where you walk, Kathy," Richie said in a low voice.

Kathy followed him toward the stairs and they started up slowly, Kathy's heart in her throat.

They came out again into the little choir dressing room off the platform. It was lighter up here because there were two windows in the room.

When they stepped out into the auditorium Kathy whispered, "Are you going up to the bell tower, Richie?"

Richie shook his head. "Your father said it was locked and nobody could get up there."

They moved cautiously out on the platform, Kathy staring fearfully down toward the far end of the room. Richie moved around the dust-covered pulpit on the platform. Kathy bumped into him suddenly and said, "Oh!"

"All right," Richie told her.

Kathy swallowed. Her legs were weak again. She could feel her breath coming and going.

"Nothing out here," Richie said, looking around.

He drew his breath and he called sharply, "Luis? Luis?"

His voice re-echoed through the empty building, bouncing off the walls, but there was no reply.

Kathy pointed to another door on the far side of the platform. "Richie," she whispered, "there's another room over there."

Richie nodded and walked toward the door hesitantly, Kathy following him.

Outside, in the churchyard, Kathy could hear Hallie calling as if from a long distance, "Kathy? Kathy? Are you all right?"

"Luis?" Richie called. "Luis Gonzales? Are you here?"

He stopped in front of the door and was reaching for the doorknob when they heard the sound from inside. It was a low, ghostly moan coming from inside the room.

"*Richie!*" Kathy whispered, her blood cold. "*What—what was that?*"

"I—I don't know," Richie muttered, and his voice was shaky, too.

Then they heard the moan again, this time softer, more bloodcurdling.

"*Richie!*" Kathy cried. "*It—it's the ghost!*"

Both of them started running at the same time, across the platform, into the opposite room, and then down the steep stairs to the basement.

Richie stumbled over a chair in the darkened basement, picked himself up, and followed Kathy out through the opening, slamming the door shut behind him.

"Hallie?" Kathy cried when they came out into the yard. "Hallie? Where are you?"

Hallie was nowhere in sight. Kathy ran toward the corner of the building, almost colliding with Hallie, who had heard her and was running in her direction.

"*Kathy!*" Hallie gasped. "*Oh, Kathy! I thought it had gotten you, too!*"

Kathy stared at her. "Gotten me, *too?*" she repeated.

Richie, coming up beside them, said, "Where's Juanita?"

"She's gone," Hallie half-sobbed. "Kathy, *it* got her. *Juanita's gone!*"

Kathy stared at her, unable to grasp this fact for a moment, unable to speak. Then she called loudly, frantically, "Juanita! Come out. *Please come out!*"

9

Richie was staring at Hallie.

"How—how did she get in?" he asked, mystified.

"Little Chiquita got away," Hallie explained, her voice still trembling. "The kitten jumped out of Juanita's arms and Juanita ran after her around the side of the building. When I went to look for her, she was gone. I can't find her any place, Kathy."

"We've got to find her," Richie cried. "Come on."

They ran around to the back of the building and looked in among the trees, but Juanita was nowhere to be seen.

"I know she's inside," Hallie kept crying. "I just know it."

"Hallie," Richie said quietly, "you go on home

and tell your father. Ask him to come down here right away."

"What are you going to do?" Kathy asked him.

"We can't leave Juanita in there alone," Richie told her. "Hallie, you go ahead now."

Hallie stared at Kathy, opened-mouthed, and then she started to run toward the gate.

"You—you're going back in?" Kathy asked slowly.

Richie nodded.

"But that—that moaning!"

Richie swallowed. "We'll have to see what it was," he said. "Come on, Kathy."

They walked around to the rear of the church building again, and then Richie, taking a deep breath, went down the steps to the door. Kathy followed him, the fear making her drag her feet.

When Richie tried the door, though, it wouldn't open.

"Whatever is in there," Kathy gasped, "locked it on us."

"Nonsense," Richie told her. "I think I know what happened. When I slammed the door shut behind me, coming out, I must have moved the latch. Now it's locked from the inside."

"What are we going to do?" Kathy asked him, her courage coming back a little. She was thinking of poor little Juanita inside the building, alone.

"We'll have to find out how Juanita got in," Richie said. "Come on, Kathy."

They went back up the steps and started circling the church, looking up at the windows.

"She couldn't have gotten in through the front door," Richie said, "because we know that's locked, so it must have been through a window."

"But they're all closed," Kathy told him.

They were moving around the huge maple which grew up close to the wall of the building on one side, and now Richie went in under the low-hanging branches and he called suddenly,

"Here, Kathy! Here's where she went in. I'll bet the kitten went up into the tree and then through the window here. It's open."

Kathy joined him under the tree, and looking up she could see where some of the branches had grown right up against a window which was partly open.

"The kitten must have gone in there," Richie said, "and Juanita followed it. I'm going up, Kathy."

It was quite easy climbing up the branches to the window and in a moment Richie was peering inside.

"See anything?" Kathy whispered.

Richie shook his head.

"I—I'm coming up," Kathy called and she, too, climbed up the branches until she was close behind him.

Richie said softly, "I'm going in, Kathy."

Kathy didn't say anything, but when he slid in through the half-open window and dropped to the floor, she followed. They found themselves halfway down the gloomy auditorium.

It seemed to be darker now than it had been before.

"There's the room," Kathy whispered, "and—and, Richie, it's *open* now!"

Off to the left of the platform was the room from which they'd heard the moaning sounds. The door had been closed before, but now it was partly open.

"*Oh, Richie,*" Kathy half-sobbed. "Do you think Juanita's in there?"

"I don't know," Richie muttered. "We'll have to look."

"I'm afraid to go near it," Kathy whispered.

Richie had taken a few steps forward and was now only about a dozen feet from the door. He said suddenly in a low voice, "Isn't that Juanita's hair ribbon, Kathy?"

He was pointing to an object on the floor, a small, red hair ribbon Juanita had been wearing that afternoon. It lay just outside the door.

"She *is* in there!" Kathy gasped. "*Richie!*"

She could hear Richie swallow as he stepped forward, reached out his hand and pushed the door open all the way. Kathy, coming up behind him, peered into the darkness, her heart pounding, breath short.

"Juanita?" Richie called.

Just then they heard the sounds from the front door of the church. Someone was trying to open the door with a key, and then Kathy heard Hallie calling from outside.

"Kathy? Kathy? Are you all right?"

A moment later the door swung open and Sheriff Harper, Mr. Gunn, and Hallie's father came in, Hallie following them.

"Kathy?" Mr. Gunn called sharply.

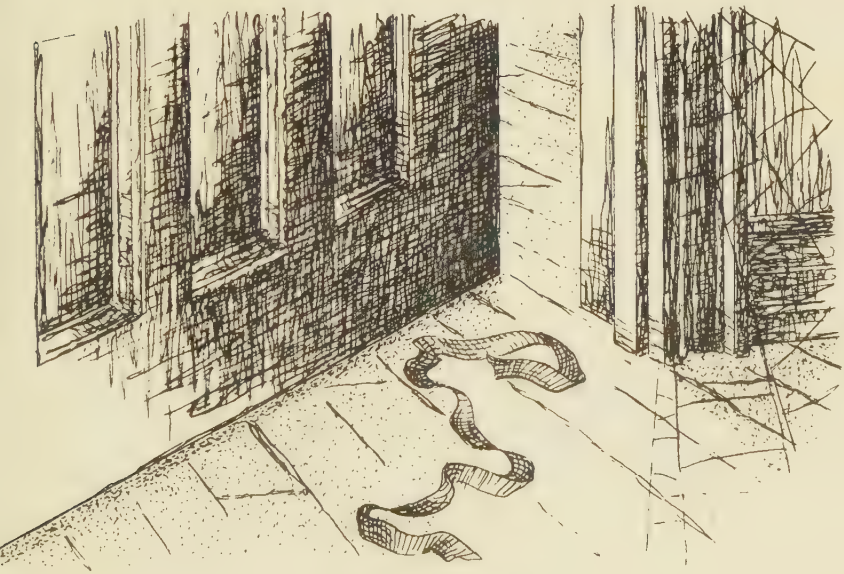
"Here we are," Kathy cried. "Dad, Juanita's in

that room here on the stage."

Sheriff Harper and the two men hurried down the aisle and up on the platform, pushing past Richie and Kathy who had stepped back. Sheriff Harper flashed his light inside.

Kathy saw him stare for a moment and then move forward. Hallie was standing beside Kathy now and Kathy could feel her trembling hand on her arm.

Mr. Gunn and Hallie's father followed Sheriff Harper into the room. Richie stepped to the door, looked in, and then he said suddenly, "Kathy! It's Luis!"



10

KATHY LOOKED into the room and she saw Luis Gonzales lying on a pile of rags in one corner of the empty room. His face in the light of Sheriff Harper's flashlight was flushed with fever. His head was moving from side to side as he moaned slightly.

Juanita crouched beside him, the little kitten in her lap.

"He is sick," Juanita kept repeating. "Luis, he is so sick."

Sheriff Harper said quickly, "We'll have to get this boy to the hospital, Jim. Give me a hand."

Quickly, they lifted Luis from the floor and carried him toward the front door.

Kathy was saying as she walked with Juanita, "Did you go in by the window, Juanita?"

"*Si*," Juanita nodded. "I follow poor little Chi-

quita. I am afraid for her. Then I hear moan. I look in room and find Luis."

"We thought you were dead," Hallie cried excitedly as she walked beside them.

Kathy looked at Richie and she could tell he was thinking the same thing she was—of little Juanita, brave as lions, all alone in that shadowy church.

Outside, they watched Sheriff Harper lift Luis gently into the back seat of the car, and in a few moments, with the red light flashing on its dome, the car took off toward the hospital. Hallie's father had gone along, sitting in the back seat with Luis.

Outside, Kathy was saying, "I guess Luis got in the same way as the kitten, through the window by the tree. But—but what was he doing there, Juanita?"

"I think he lived there," Mr. Gunn explained quietly. "The poor boy didn't have a home. I suppose just about everyone forgot about him."

"There was food," Juanita said. "Luis live in church. But he cannot eat now. He is so sick."

Hallie said slowly. "He—he was *living* in the church?"

As they walked down the street Mr. Gunn said in a tight voice, "The boy had to live somewhere, and no one in this town seemed to be too much interested in him."

Kathy watched the blinking light on the sheriff's car as it sped away, and then she remembered Luis Gonzales walking through the rain that afternoon, his clothes soggy. Very probably he'd picked up a bad cold and it had gotten worse in the cold, damp building.

"I dream he need help," Juanita said slowly.

"Can—can we go over to the hospital to see how he is?" Kathy asked her father.

"I intend to go over," Mr. Gunn assured her.

Back home he got the car out of the garage and the five of them, Kathy, Hallie, Juanita, Richie, and Mr. Gunn, drove to the hospital.

On the way Kathy told her father how they'd found Luis' wagon in the churchyard and then had gone in to look for him.

Richie said, "I guess we shouldn't have done it, Mr. Gunn, but I knew the basement door was open and I wanted to have a look."

"Then we heard the moaning," Kathy went on,

"and I screamed and we got scared. Then we found out that Juanita was gone, too."

At the hospital they learned that Luis had been put to bed and that they could probably see him in a day or two.

"I am so glad Luis, he is alive," little Juanita said softly.

"But—but what about the bell?" Hallie asked suddenly. "What about the ghost bell?"

Richie said, "I think Luis can tell us about that when he gets better."

Mr. Gunn was saying almost to himself as they drove back from the hospital, "The boy just didn't know where to go. He had no one to look after him. He was trying to do the best he could, living on the few pennies he got here and there from his papers and bottles."

"Dad," Kathy asked, "do you think we can help him now?"

"I'm going to bring it up at the town board meeting," Mr. Gunn said quietly. "We're not only going to help him, Kathy, but all those people up there in Spanish Town. It's been a problem we've postponed too long."

Two days later when Kathy, Hallie, Richie, and Juanita visited Luis for the first time, they found him sitting up in the hospital bed. The fever was gone and his brown eyes were clear.

"We're so glad to see you're all right, Luis," Kathy told him happily.

"I am warm," Luis smiled. "It is nice place here. It was cold in church."

"Were you really living there?" Kathy asked him curiously.

"*Si*," Luis nodded. "I have no place."

Richie said, "Tell us about the bell, Luis. Was it you made the bell ring?"

Luis looked down at the bed covers. "I do wrong thing," he said slowly. "I am afraid. When I see you near church I am afraid you will find where I live and I will not be able to stay there. I do not know where to go."

"But—but how did you make the bell ring?" Hallie asked, puzzled. "You couldn't get up into the tower and there was no rope."

"I throw small stone at bell," Luis explained. "I hide in bushes and throw small stone. Make it ring. When you hear it you run away. I am sorry."

Richie said, "That's why it didn't sound like a real bell, Kathy. It was just a soft clang."

"We were scared half to death," Hallie laughed.

"I am sorry," Luis apologized again. "I am afraid. I have no place to go."

Luis Gonzales did have a place to stay a few days later. The whole town of Ryeville knew his story, and little Artie Bowers' family asked if they could take care of him. They had plenty of room in their home, and they were willing to pay Luis some afternoons and evenings for looking after Artie, at least until one of Luis' relatives came back from Puerto Rico.

"I'm so glad he'll have a nice home to live in," Kathy said when she heard the news. "He'll be able to go back to school now, too."

Hallie, who was listening, said, "He won't have to live in the old church any more. I've heard people say that they ought to tear it down."

Mr. Gunn said, "Some of us who are on the town board, Hallie, have other ideas about Christ Church."

"Other ideas?" Kathy asked.

"The building isn't going to be torn down," Mr. Gunn told her. "Instead, we're going to provide tools and some materials, and some carpentry help, and the people of Spanish Town are going to renovate the old church and fix it up as a kind of occupational training school and recreation hall for the migrant help."

"That's wonderful!" Kathy cried.

"It'll be a place where they can meet," Mr. Gunn was saying, "where they can take some special English courses, be taught trades, and eventually take care of themselves. Besides that, there's going to be a new housing development up on that hill. The bank is going to loan money at low interest rates, and the people of this town are going to help the migrants to build one-story concrete dwellings with up-to-date plumbing and all the facilities."

"That'll be wonderful," Kathy smiled. "It means Juanita will get to live in a nice house."

"And just think," Hallie said softly, "that it all began when we heard the old Christ Church bell ring. Maybe it—it was trying to *tell* us something, Kathy."

"The 'death' bell," Kathy said slowly, "but I guess the way things are working out now you might call it the—the 'life' bell."

Mr. Gunn smiled. "That would be a good name for it, Kathy," he said. "A really good name, indeed."

(CONTINUED FROM FRONT FLAP)

she thought the ghost in the old church had "got" him. But Kathy pointed out that there had to be a solution, and, with varying degrees of bravery, the three girls, aided by their friend Richie, set out to find it.

This is a first mystery story by Val Abbott. It has been illustrated throughout by Ruth Chew, who studied at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D. C., and now lives in Brooklyn, writing and illustrating books of her own.

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